

TAKE OUT

FELICITY YOUNG

ABOUT THE BOOK

Take Out is Felicity Young's third DSS Stevie Hooper mystery. Each of these crime novels — *An Easeful Death*, *Harum Scarum*, and now *Take Out* — is set in and around Perth, Western Australia.

When the book begins, Stevie is involved in the final stages of a cyber-predator case as it goes through the courts; she is renovating a house with her partner Monty (himself a member of the police force) and worrying about Monty's imminent heart procedure. She is looking forward to three weeks of well-earned leave from the Sex Crimes Unit, when she will become 'the perfect mother [for her daughter Izzy]: school runs, excursions, sitting through assemblies, helping with reading classes ...'

This time, the crime is not even in Hooper's jurisdiction. Skye Williams, a community nurse, requests the assistance of her friend Stevie after the local constabulary appear to ignore the concerned calls of an elderly neighbour. Together the women enter the house of Delia and Jon Pavel, 'early thirties, filthy rich' and there they make an unexpected find.

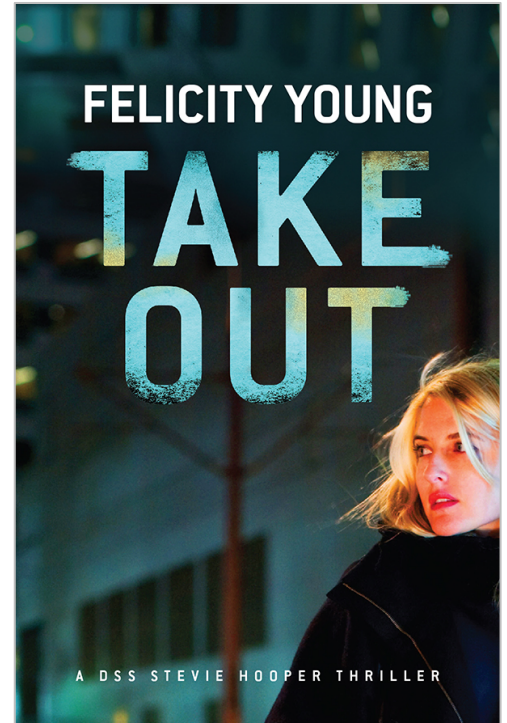
What the women discover, and Stevie's subsequent inadvertent involvement in a case on someone else's turf, will impact with grave consequences on her and on those she loves.

Through its focus on Mai, the young mother from Thailand, *Take Out* exposes the workings of a brutal international crime ring and its exploitation of the young women of impoverished families in developing nations.

Take Out also uses the character of the elderly Lilly Hardegan, and the fragments of letters she writes in her head, to establish echoes and parallels with Mai's plight.

In each Stevie Hooper book, Young's portrayal of female victims provides a point of intrigue and distinction. Her female antagonists (like the Mamasan) are strong and interesting 'baddies'. More than that, Young's victims are never entirely passive and certainly not always 'good': they conduct their lives according to their own moral code. They are survivors — even innovative or entrepreneurial — in their response to adversity.

With the conclusion of each Stevie Hooper novel, Young does not offer the closure of a 'happy ending', but an open-ended acknowledgement of the complexities of human nature.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Felicity Young was born in Hanover, Germany, in 1960 and went to boarding school in the United Kingdom while her parents were posted around the world with the British Army. After completing a degree in English literature, and moving to rural Western Australia, she took up writing in the early 2000s. Having a brother-in-law who is a retired police superintendent, it was almost inevitable she would turn to crime writing.

Her first novel, *A Certain Malice*, was published in Britain by Crème de la Crime in 2005. Her next two novels featured DSS Stevie Hooper and were published by Fremantle Press in 2007 (*An Easeful Death*) and 2008 (*Harum Scarum*).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. A crime novel is often a genre in which the detective figure seeks to establish momentary order in a chaotic, uncertain and often violent world. Does *Take Out* reinforce or resist this aspect of the genre?
2. What does Stevie's relationship with Monty tell you about her? Why is the investigator in any crime novel never allowed to be 'happy'? Why must there always be discord or disharmony in their private lives? You might compare Stevie Hooper with other detective figures in other novels.
3. In what ways does *Take Out* address the issue of mothers balancing work and children? Does the novel offer any solutions to Stevie's dilemma?
4. Stevie thinks about 'the contradiction that was Skye – kind, considerate and compassionate to everything and everyone except the men in her life' (p. 208). How might this contradiction be explained?
5. In what ways is the Skye Williams character a logical fit in the spectrum of the cast of Felicity Young female characters?
6. Does Luke Fowler arouse sympathy or irritation? What is the role of his character in this story? How does the reader's perception of Fowler change over the course of the novel?
7. Discuss the portrayal of female victims in *Take Out*, such as Mai and Lilly Hardegan. In what way do they subvert a reader's expectations of a 'victim'?
8. Men and women can be victims of war in different ways, and their pain can continue across time and generations. Discuss in relation to the Hardegan family.
9. Discuss ways in which the story of Lilly Hardegan parallels that of Mai.
10. Discuss similarities and differences between Mai and the Mamasan.
11. In what ways might the Mamasan be seen to be a victim?
12. What difference would it make to your perception of Mai if the epilogue were not included in this story?
13. Why has Young chosen to include the character of Niran? What does the reader gain from his perspective?
14. Why does Lilly feel responsible for the 'girls' she travels with on the plane? To what extent is she responsible for their plight? Why does she call them the 'poor lost girls' (p. 280)? What echoes, beyond the novel, does this phrase evoke?
15. What is the effect on the reader of the addition of Lilly's handwritten excerpts as she mentally composes her letter? What insight do the excerpts allow the reader into the character of Mrs Hardegan? What would have been the effect of their absence?
16. What does this novel tell us about power relationships between cultures that 'have' and those that 'have not'?
17. In what ways can a crime novel be a vehicle for social commentary?
18. In what ways is 'justice' fully realised in this novel?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

This is a very readable novel with realistic characters. What do you aim to achieve in the stories you tell?

I aim to entertain, but if I also raise awareness of contemporary criminal activities or social problems, so much the better.

Why does the genre of crime fiction appeal to you?

I enjoy the almost unlimited boundaries and flexibility that crime fiction offers. There are subgenres to suit all tastes from the literary to the cosy, and from sci-fi to the historical mystery. As long as the plot involves some kind of crime, you can do almost anything within the genre.

How do you research police procedures, and other areas such as recent developments in international criminal activity?

Getting the police procedure right is the hardest part. My retired cop brother-in-law was a huge help for the first two books, but he's been out of the job for ten years now and is getting a bit rusty. I now have a couple of current cop contacts who are very helpful, but also extremely busy, so I have to make sure I don't bombard them too much.

As for the international criminal activity, that's just a question of reading the newspapers, googling and spending a fortune at Amazon.

Your characterisations are quite complex, from Skye who is kind and compassionate but treats men carelessly, to Stevie Hooper herself who is a tough professional but also a mother and wife. How much do you model your characters on real people?

Most my characters are composites, that is mixtures of people I have known, sprinkled with creative licence. Some of Skye's characteristics belong to an old nursing friend of mine. Lilly Hardegan is a composite of several maiden aunts from both sides of the family — one aunt owned a decrepit parrot, another was very arty and wore screen-painted dresses and another was ex-navy. The stroke side was influenced by my own experiences of nursing stroke victims.

Stevie Hooper is definitely not me, but some of her domestic experiences are mine, for example coming home one evening to find every available surface of the kitchen (even the fish tank) covered with strands of drying pasta.

The victims are drawn as complex characters; for example Mai is not simply an innocent victim, and Lilly Hardegan has a complicated history and is much more than an elderly stroke victim. How did you approach your portrayal of victims in this novel?

All good or all bad isn't very realistic — and it's also boring to write. I see my characters in various shades of grey, some darker than others. Similarly, I didn't want this to be just an 'only women are victims' story. Lilly's husband was a victim too.

The illegal prostitution of Mai is in contrast to Skye's willing work in the sex trade, and both can be compared to Lilly Hardegan's history. Is there a message you intended to convey through these characters?

That's a hard one! Not so much a message as a representation of different reactions to the sexual situations the characters find themselves in.

Skye doesn't feel exploited at all, if anything she's a bit of an exploiter herself.

Lin needs to be passive and accepting in order to survive. In Mai's case it's a question of temporary acceptance until she can better her captors. Lilly complied because she had no choice, but she never accepts the situation that was forced on her. Her need for vengeance follows her into old age. Different personalities react differently to similar situations.

The balancing act of a working mother is shown in Stevie Hooper's life. How important is this issue to the story?

This balancing act is very important; it's part of Stevie's identity developed in the earlier books, and will hopefully be carried on in subsequent books. I don't think there are many 'feisty chicks' in the detective genre who are mothers and partners/wives too. I like to give Stevie cases that she will relate to on a personal level, often involving kids. I think this adds a layer of emotional intensity that is sometimes missing in standard police procedural novels.

Why did you choose to write an ending with some ambiguity?

In my mind there is no doubt about what's going on. Mai is doing what was done to her, but with a little less ruthlessness because she has been tempered by her own experiences. The cycle is repeating itself.



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